

The lost souls

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Cézanne de Heus

This edition first published in 2017.

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ISBN: 9789402169843

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To dad. Happy birthday old man.

*Let's keep those bears from jumping and the
double dumbness away.*

Prologue

The road is empty as I manoeuvre my way down the streets. Traffic lights jump from red immediately to green when I near them and I only have to stop once to let a car on my right turn the corner before I speed onto the highway. I look in my rear-view mirror to see what's happening behind me before I switch gear and pass the car that had been driving in front of me. A steady wind blows against my side, but it's nothing I can't take. I speed up some more and only slow down when I've reached the next gas station where I pull up. I park my motorcycle in one of the empty parking spots before I sit up. The engine of the motor falls silent when I turn it off and I swing my leg over the vehicle. As I walk to the automatic doors of the gas station store I push the keys into my pocket and pull my helmet off. No one's at the coffee machine, which gives me quick access to a much needed cup of cappuccino. The automatic doors behind me open, letting a cold breeze in, before they close again. A hand reaches for a cup next to me and turns one around.

'You've got the information?' I ask casually.

The man hums and hands me the sugar. As I take it from him I feel him slip something into the pocket of my jacket. I take my coffee and step away from the coffee machine, putting a cap on top of it before making my way back outside. The cold winter air slaps against the side of my face, but I try to ignore it as I take a swig from my coffee. The hot liquid fills my mouth before it makes its way down my throat, warming me up from the inside. The man steps outside as well and walks to one of the cars next to a pump. He steps into a BMW and drives off

only seconds later. His eyes never meeting mine. I finish my coffee, taking my time, before I brush some loose strands of hair out of my face and pull my helmet back over my head. After I've swung my leg over the motorcycle and have seated down again I start the engine, pull the clutch lever before pressing the shifter down to first gear. I make the engine roar and the motor comes to life underneath me. I gently twist the throttle and as the motor gains forward momentum, I put my feet up on the pegs and drive away from the parking spot, away from the gas station, away from the meeting point.

An hour drive later I'm driving down a road in the middle of nowhere. Just ahead I see a lone picnic table, ready for some, probably lost, camper family to stop and eat their lunch. I pull up a few feet away from the table and step away from my motorcycle, pulling the thing that the guy had pushed into my pocket out of it. It's the usual disposable phone you receive whenever you're out of the country on an assignment and can't get your next one in person. I press a code in and hold it up to my ear.

'Agent Carter, 2309.' I state.

The line is silent for a moment, only to be interrupted by one simple word. A word that holds a lot of meaning. 'Ananas.' the voice says. That's all I get, but that's all it takes to make the blood through my veins run cold. *Ananas*. Why me? Why now? I don't have much time to think about the word, because the phone will detonate within five seconds. I throw the phone away and turn back to my motor. An explosion sounds behind me and echoes over the empty lands. I take a moment to calm down, or at least get my heartbeat back to a normal rate. I don't have any choice; *Ananas* it is.

1 Ananas

Headquarters, confidential location

My flat is silent when I enter. The motorcycle is parked downstairs in the parking lot of the building after a quick ride home from the airport, the phone that had brought me the news lies destroyed on the ground in the middle of nowhere in a different country. *Ananas, why Ananas?* I had been asking the same question over and over again on my way back. How come I am the one getting this assignment? Ananas is one of the highest confidential operations. Two agents before me have tried to finish the job, but both of them disappeared at some point or another during the operation. Between the agents of the Secret service it was known as a cursed operation, but no one knew what the assignment exactly was. The only thing everyone knew was that once an agent received Ananas, they were practically sentenced to die.

I changed my motorcycle gear for my pyjamas and made myself ready for bed. I didn't know how I was supposed to fall asleep after this news. I've done countless of assignments before, one worse than the other. A few times I had stood straight across from Death, taunting me as it stared me in the eyes, but I was always too quick, never did it manage to curl its fingers around my arm and pull me with it. Was this time going to be different? Was Death finally going to have its way? It can't be. I just had to wait for the debriefing tomorrow morning at Headquarters and see what Chief has to tell me.

One advantage on getting to hear “Ananas” from the other side of the phone call was that I’d finally find out what the assignment is.

The clouds are dark outside and soon it will rain. I make my way into the building we agents know as Headquarters and show my badge to the security guard before holding my head steady for the iris scan. A small light turns green and I push through the door. I pass the lifts and walk into the hallway that leads to a staircase at the end of it, that would then lead me up towards another hallway where Chief’s office can be found. A place that had felt like home, feels far from it now. The assignment had been the subject of my thoughts the whole duration of the night. The unknown had been tormenting me like it never had before.

Since I was a little girl, I had been trained to become a secret agent. No one knew of our organisation except for the highest level of the government. We quietly made the world a better place, at least that was what we were told by our superiors. When I was merely eight years of age I lost my parents and since I didn’t have any other family, I was placed into an orphanage. Little did I know the big man that came walking into the orphanage about half a year later, would take me with him and make me the top of my class. I trained day in and day out, him looking over my shoulder, guiding me through life as I grew up into a young woman and became better and better. He was, and still is, both a mentor and a father to me, who occasionally sends me out on missions that involve getting hit, shot and almost murdered while murdering others in case it is necessary.

The hallway leading to the staircase has a few classrooms on either side of it, where young cadets are taught in subjects both generally given at a normal

school like math and history, however both were given with more depth so this was usable later during an assignment, but also classes in which the teacher taught the children how to make a murder weapon out of paper and how to make a bomb with household products. The classroom was an open space with glass walls on the side of the hallway, this to give an open feeling both to passers-by as well as the people inside. It also created the idea of always being watched and always having to be careful with what you're doing, because even if you don't see them, there might be someone lurking in a corner watching you. In this room I had learned how to be sneaky and quick in my movements, how to do things under the eyes of others while they didn't have a clue what was going on.

A girl around the age of 12 looks up from the book she should be studying and meets my eyes. She gives me a curt nod, which I return before disappearing on the staircase leading to the next floor.

I stop in my track when I reach Chief's office and it takes me a moment to get myself to knock on the door I had knocked on many times before for a short debriefing or a new assignment. But I eventually do and as my knuckles collide with the wood of the door I hear Chief's voice from the other side of the black door. 'Come in.'

'Chief.'

'Agent Carter.' he nods, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips as I walk in. 'You're here for the assignment?'

'I am.' I nod.

Chief motions to the chair opposite him and as I walk over to it and sit down he eyes me for a moment in silence.

Chief, a guy of 52, is someone who always walks around in a suit and looks organised and well put

together. His greying hair has started to thin over the past three years and since a few months he had started to stop shaving off his whole beard and was left with a stubble. He had once told me it made him feel more like an adult. I had merely laughed at this statement while shaking my head because Chief could be quite the joker when he wanted to and even a bit of a child sometimes. The usual cup of coffee is located on his left side, a small plate with a cookie on it and a bit of whipped cream next to the cookie. 'You know that's not good for your cholesterol, right?' I repeat what I had told him so many times before.

He grins and shrugs. 'Don't tell my doctor.' he winks. Chief turns to his laptop when a ping sounds. He quickly types something down with two fingers, staring down at the keyboard, his glasses low on his nose, every so often looking back up to the screen to see if what he had typed was correct. I had often told him to learn how to type with two hands, but he had always told me he was too old and it didn't matter anymore anyway. For someone who had been one of the best secret agents of his generation, he had little skills concerning a computer. He turns away from his laptop and looks back towards me.

'Ananas.' he says, turning a closed folder that had been lying on his desk on the other side of his laptop towards me that holds big, fat, red letters on it that state "CONFIDENTIAL". "This assignment is highly confidential. You and you alone are allowed to look into this file, you cannot share this information with anyone and so on, you've heard it before. But do note, this assignment is at the highest confidentiality level. We only send out the best for this and currently you are the best. Do you understand?"

I take in a silent breath and nod.

‘Good.’ he nods. ‘Everything you need to know is in the file, you know what to do with it as soon as you have read it.’

I nod again and take the file from his desk as I push myself up.

‘Oh and Celia,’ he starts. ‘be careful. This assignment is not to be taken lightly.’

‘I always am.’ I tell him before turning around and walking out of his office again.

The folder has been lying on my coffee table for the past half hour. Something inside me pulls me to open it, the other part of me has kept me from immediately doing so. I don’t know whether I’m afraid of what I might find inside or whether I just want to stretch out the moment of this assignment becoming reality. I get up one more time to make myself a cup of coffee before I sit back down on my couch and reluctantly pull the folder to me. The folder is not a normal folder. This one has both a fingerprint scan as an iris scan. This to make sure not everyone can get into the file. Only the highest level of confidential assignments have this kind of opening process for their file folders.

Before this assignment I had one mission that had the same process for opening the file, just one. That mission had send me to Malaysia, where a mole had been situated in the government and had to be silently dealt with.

I press my finger down on the finger-scanner and then hold the iris scanner in front of my eye. This unlocks the folder and gives me access into the file. I pull out the first paper and look down at it. *Location: Latin America, Colombia.*

Next to the location the file tells me about the strange and unexplainable disappearances of people

there, both civilians as well as better known people, including amongst others; a British actress who disappeared in Argentina who had been there to film her next movie, the recently disappeared congress member of Colombia and the names of the two agents that we have lost since they went on their way and disappeared in Ecuador and Peru.

The assignment is to gather intel on what happened, mainly focussing on congress man Hernández, to find the disappeared people and bring in the people behind the disappearances either dead or alive.

Apart from the obvious questions; why are these disappearances strange and unexplainable? And why are these people taken away from civilization? The question that is really bothering me is; How come two of our best agents have disappeared as well? Agents who have years of experience, who have defeated death multiple times, agents whom I have looked up to for a very long time. How come they both have disappeared in the past four months during their time on this mission?

In the folder I find a fake passport with my new identity for the duration of this mission, including a paper telling me about this new identification as well as a plane ticket for a one way trip to Colombia. It seems to feel a bit ironic, a one way ticket, as if they know I won't be coming back either. But this is what they always do, since they don't know when you'll have officially fulfilled your assignment. There is a deadline, but assignments are in most cases not to be rushed, this to have a higher probability to get the important intel that is needed and earn trust with the people who need to trust you.

My name for the upcoming assignment is Carina Prince, a 22 year old girl, who is going to Colombia for an exchange program at a university there. The

advantage of being a young agent is that people don't necessarily think of you as a threat and they often underestimate you. This can be very useful in a fight, especially in hand to hand combat. I stare down at the next paper, reading every word as closely as I can to take in all the information before I have to destroy everything, this to prevent anyone from accidentally coming across it all.

What makes this string of disappearances strange is that the people seem to have disappeared into thin air. There's nothing that indicates a struggle nor marks of dragging someone across the floor, where they might've been taken from nor where they might've been taken to. The only thing that indicates they disappeared is that their family, friends, neighbours or colleagues hadn't seen them for days and had started to worry. Most had gone to the police to file a missing person report and slowly more had come. The most recent one was the Colombian congress man who disappeared into thin air, this man has been the cause of the reopening of this assignment.

The last agent who was sent to Latin America had gone off our radar after three weeks in Peru. He had initially been sent to Ecuador after the first agent who had been sent to Ecuador to look into the disappearances and whom had gone missing after a month there. It was still unknown why Agent Richardson had gone to Peru, but apparently it was not important enough to send me to Peru as well. He had been gone for two months by now, that's why I had not thought Ananas would be an assignment to be given out again to any of the agents, least of all myself. At least I knew what to look into tonight; Colombia and the congress man that disappeared. The first thing I would do after landing in Colombia after a long flight would be

to go to his last known whereabouts. I'll be mainly undercover as an exchange student so I can use the excuse for asking questions that I'm writing an essay about this guy. I would need to get intel on his life story, the places he has lived in his life, important turning points in his life and so on.

2 Ready or not

Training facility, confidential location

A long and slow night had passed and I dragged myself out of bed at five in the morning to push in some training before leaving for my assignment. I slowly make my way over to my bathroom and splash some cold water in my face to wake myself up a bit more. I hate mornings, I always have. After brushing my teeth and pulling on my yoga pants and sports bra I loosely braid my hair back to have no problems with my helmet and grab my shoes, ready to go out the door. I would get myself something to eat over at the training facility of the Secret service. My keys are still on the kitchen counter, where I had left them after arriving back to my flat yesterday afternoon. I have to get the frustration of the past two days out of my system before starting on the source of the frustration. I pull my leather jacket on and my shoes before leaving my flat. My motorcycle is parked downstairs on the parking lot and I swing my leg over it when I've reached it, pushing the keys into the ignition. The motor roars to life underneath me as I start my motor and I wait for a moment to let the motor warm up a bit before driving off the parking lot and to the training facility.

The advantage of getting up this early is that no one is on the road at this Godforsaken hour, the disadvantage however is that I am. I can't help but yawn as I pull up to the training facility and park my motorcycle. The parking lot is mostly empty, but most agents that are still training with a mentor and go to the classes in the Headquarters are living in the residence

close by. To most people this facility and residence are known as a school for the difficult cases, this keeps most prying eyes away, but little do they know children are turned into extremely dangerous and skilled killers. I puff out a sigh as I make my way into the building I have been returning to on a daily basis when I'm not out on an assignment since I was eight.

The first time I had ever come here I had stared my eyes out. In one room young adults were fighting hand to hand combat, murder in their eyes. In the next children younger than I was were throwing knives at practice targets with the form of a full grown human being. I had been frightened, but too proud to tell the guy that walked next to me through the hallways. This guy had saved me from the orphanage, a place I hated, a place I had wanted to escape the moment I had been placed there. I couldn't disappoint him now and walk away. I had balled my hands into fists and had pushed my chest forward, making myself ready to be just as good, or better, as the best people in this place.

I step into the changing room and find my locker where I push my helmet and keys in, I change my shoes for my training shoes and loosen the braid before pulling my hair up into a ponytail. As I walk into the training room I find Matthew punching his fist against a punching bag.

'I'm not the only one who needs to get some frustration out of their system I see.' I state. Matthew stops and turns to me, a smile appearing on his face as he meets my eyes. 'Good morning to you too.' he says. 'Why are you here this early?'

'I have a flight to catch in a few hours.'

'Did you receive a new assignment?' he asks.